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Antidotes to Humanism

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A solid sense of place is lost to most of us today. If we gain it as youths, we often lose our sense of place in nature once our work lives press upon us. We do not take the time, as a rule, to learn the features of our regions and feel at home in them. Worse, for those of us who work as scholars and teachers, we rarely study nature unless we teach the sciences. We work with arts and letters, business or education or the social sciences. We study human disciplines. Our built environments enclose and cushion us, embargo nature, and help us forget we still depend upon the natural world for food, water, air, and even for spiritual balance. Some of this estrangement might be traced to historical humanism, to Christian humanism, or to what contemporary humanists define as humanism. The face of humanism has changed greatly through the centuries. Humanism and the environment has become the subject of more scholarly research in recent decades. The subject proved contentious enough to prompt a special issue of *Free Inquiry*, the journal published by the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism.[1] Card-carrying humanists, my friends among them, are smarting beneath charges that their ideologies have promulgated a narrow anthropocentrism, have elevated humans above other species on the planet, and have inadvertently damaged the biological systems on which every living thing relies.

It's a slippery term, "humanism," and contemporary definitions clash depending on who is writing. Here is my definition. Humanism is a philosophical orientation that privileges the human; it depends heavily upon science, on replicable experience, and on rationality; it valorizes philosophy, technology, and the arts; correspondingly it distrusts supernaturalism, religious ritual, and emotional exuberance. This definition might differ if written by a humanist today. It would differ if written by a Christian humanist of the European or English Renaissance. And this definition certainly would differ if written by a fundamentalist Christian today. Such Christians and I would part ways, for I contend that a focus on human interests and concerns is a root of the humanist dilemma, whereas some Christians like to elevate our species for the way we are made allegedly in God's image. Biologist David Ehrenfeld, who is known best for his book *The Arrogance of Humanism*, offers counterpoint. Ehrenfeld examines what he calls "the religion of humanism: a supreme faith in human reason – its ability to confront and solve the many problems that humans face, its ability to rearrange both the world of Nature and the

[1] For its Spring 1993 issue, entitled "Does Humanism Encourage Human Chauvinism?", *Free Inquiry* solicited fifteen contributors, including an interview with Pulitzer Prize-winning biologist E. O. Wilson and an article co-authored by Ingrid Newkirk, founder of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

affairs of men and women so that human life will prosper" (5). By emphasizing reason and rationality in particular, humanism has erected cognitive barriers between our own species and the natural world. To line out some of the cultural assumptions that rise from historical humanism, I will turn to environmental literature and to bioregionalism, a theoretical model that can bridge humanism and environmentalism. I will examine key tenets of environmental education, relate some of my own experiences as a teacher and parent in the northwestern United States, and analyze two pertinent poems by notable English poets who responded disparately to the problems posed by humanism. My purpose is to advocate place-based interests and curricula as one antidote to humanism.

Getting in Touch

It is late spring in eastern Washington State, and I am trying to encourage my toddler son not to fear the natural world. For him the civilized environment is scary enough – between sirens, leaf blowers, lawn mowers, and automobiles barreling past the raspberry canes that sprouted from bird droppings in our yard. Today we sit on the grass of the lawn and watch dragonflies feeding on other insects that gather at dusk. Reed sees little more than glimpses of wings, flashing bodies circling in and out of view, the pilots of those wings silent and fleet, minding their own needs. My boy's eyes widen in the failing light. His mama and I hope he will feel at home among the creatures that share his corner of the world. Fat worms in the garden soil, gulls screeching and wheeling above the trees, dogs and cats and wild mice, and an osprey that perches on the willow at the park pond. The developmental plasticity in children is greater than in adults: if Reed delights in the living fragments of his home, his sense of self might expand to encompass other spaces outside of town. He might attach emotionally to nature, enough that part of his identity will stem from the nonhumans he encounters, whether he's riding in a kayak, hiking through a forest, or waking in a tent at dawn to a riot of bird songs. Perhaps Karen and I will be persistent and fortunate enough to further in Reed a "biophilia," that love of life E.O Wilson alleges to be latent in us all, an affiliation that goes beyond puppies and kittens, beyond individuals of our own kind. If we succeed in deepening his attachment to nature, our son will not see the world in strictly human terms. Like most who grow up in this technological age, Reed is sure to suffer dislocations and losses when natural areas start vanishing around him. Like so many other people, he might come to grieve wetlands filled in, wood lots toppled for new homes, or acres of tall-grass prairie gone to wheat.

He might long, in ways he's not aware, for "interspecies communion," a phrase of psychologist Chellis Glendinning (188). Someday Reed indeed might join the lug-soled troops of hikers on our public lands, backpackers "starved for what has been destroyed elsewhere and what their economy is destroying everywhere," as Wendell Berry writes (103). If Reed learns to know

himself and his backyard well enough, care for it deeply enough, respect it as part of his complex self, maybe he will not accept the devastation of nature unreflectively, won't see the ecological degradation as quite so inevitable.

This spring we paddled a stretch of the Little Spokane River near its confluence with the main Spokane River. Reed lolled his hands in the water below the bow of the kayak, stirring the wild irises in bloom. When a nearby fisherman startled three deer, they splashed from the bank and swam across a channel thirty feet away. Reed still talks about them today, having made them part of his essence, as if he'd fed upon their flesh. They still live in him. The poet Walt Whitman wrote of a similar experience, perhaps his own:

> A child went forth every day,
> And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
> And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,
> Or for many years or stretching cycles of years. (364)

And thus, as Whitman articulated well in these lines, a growing number of us believe that environment can overtop heredity as a shaping force in the formation of human character.

But now I hear the skeptic objecting that it is all exceedingly romantic and naive, impractical, to raise a child with such natural aims in mind. "He's a human," the skeptic might reply to my wife's and my idealism, "and humans are superior to other species." Many people believe we are meant to avail ourselves of creation, use it while we watch over it, as the first book of the Bible enjoins. I often hear the echoes of those powerful words in Genesis 1:28, taken here from the King James Version. "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

Not long ago I asked a class of my college students if they viewed us humans as subject to the forces of nature – or if instead they viewed us as exempt from natural law, having transcended it. The most brash and technocratic among them answered that our know-how already allows us to vanquish vast pathologies, regulate weather, and build earthquake-proof offices and homes. Soon we are sure to find cures for cancer and other mortal illnesses to attain much greater longevity. Why, there is really no limit to the bounds of our abilities to control nature! I found myself tongue-tied, dizzy, amazed in the face of their reckless certitude and anthropocentric faith. I should have replied that the naiveté of our species lies not in trusting too much in nature, but in placing overmuch faith in the prowess of humankind. It risks

collective tragedies to rely on humanist pride.

Last summer, the temperature in the 80s, Reed and I traipsed through People's Park on the city limits to get to Latah Creek. We dodged nude bathers, naturists praising the day in their own way, and we found an isolated place to splash in the gleaming stream. Ducklings, swallows, and sandpipers paddled nearby and flew past. When I turned over a rock in the water, a frantic crayfish scurried, tail first, between Reed's sandaled feet. He shrieked and leaped. Time will tell if he shrieked in fear or in glee.

Novelist Willa Cather wrote, in 1928, "ties with the earth and the farm animals and growing things...are never made at all unless they are made early" (735). If we vanquish human fears of nature instead of nature, greater mental balance might ensue.

Raising the Stakes

Environmental educators agree on the need to foster sensitivities to place in our students, both inside and outside classrooms. Particularly in entry-level classes, students urged to explore and develop connections to nature in their personal lives are more apt to thrive as scholars and postgraduate professionals. Knowledge derived from experience, emotion, memory, and personal history can cultivate greater interdisciplinary sophistication. It can balance the faulty warnings toward objectivity that weight the scales of so many disciplinary forms of knowledge. It can encourage a virtual reinterpretation of the world. On the most intimate possible level, place-based attachments to the past can empower students to shape the future. Such attachments also may empower them to look critically at technology and acknowledge the limits of our efforts to harness nature.

The future may appear increasingly global and mobile, but that need not dissuade teachers from cultivating a sense of place. David W. Orr suggests that our species' contemporary angst and disaffection can be alleviated by helping to develop "a deep concept of place as a repository of meaning, history, livelihood, healing, recreation, and sacred memory and as a source of materials, energy, food, and collective action" (163). (This is closely related to the Spanish *querencia*: a place where one feels at home, a place from which one draws strength of character.) Failure to do so will continue the trend toward becoming not merely " 'dis-placed' people who are physically removed from their homes" but indeed " 'de-placed' people, mental refugees, homeless wherever we are" (163), a key distinction that has implications worth exploring for the sake of homeless people in America today. University teachers of English and humanities can begin to cultivate a place-based consciousness by assigning writers who explore deeply the *genius loci* (spirits of place) of beloved geographies and who work to preserve them.

Examples of such writers include Sarah Orne Jewett (on nineteenth-century Maine), John Muir (on Yosemite and the Sierra-Nevada), Rick Bass (on the Northern Rockies), Sigurd Olson (on the Upper Midwest), Edward Abbey and Terry Tempest Williams (on the desert Southwest), Linda Hasselstrom (on South Dakota), and Robert Michael Pyle (on the Pacific Northwest). Reading such writers can cultivate the healthy desire to affiliate oneself with a region—whether it is named or unnamed, small or large, cultivated or wild, lush or dry.

Our lingua franca demonstrates our place-relatedness. To affiliate is "to bring or to receive into close connection as a member or a branch," "to connect or associate oneself." The root of "affiliate," Latin *filius*, means "son" and suggests (when the concept is applied to place relations) actual genetic connections to one's district of desire. Closely related, emotionally if not etymologically, are the Greek suffixes -*philia*, meaning "friendship," and - *philos*, translated as "dear." This Greek suffix has picked up some unfortunate connotations of pathology (as in necrophilia or pedophilia), thus partly eclipsing the more healthy denotations of intimacy and love that shape *biophilia*. Biologist E. O. Wilson in 1984 rejuvenated the word, used first by psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. Wilson's biophilia hypothesis holds that "'the connections that humans unconsciously seek with the rest of life'" are innate (qtd. in Orr 46). To whatever degree life remains tied to the land—through air, water, animals or plants for food—biophilia can broadly suggest a sense of connection and a dear friendship with particular places as well. Topophilia, a related term from geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, to denote "all of the human being's affective ties with the material environment" (10), would be nice to engender in students, if it is too late for most of them to remember place-love in some collective unconscious. However, as Orr laments, reflecting ruefully upon education today, "Locality has no standing in the modern curriculum" (129). In literary studies the closest focus is regionalism (also known somewhat pejoratively as "local color"), which is characterized by slang and vernacular speech patterns, "quaint" folkways and folklore, and by rural characters or "rustics." Literary scholars and critics have too rarely seen fit to treat local- color writing and its characters as much more than antiques or curios.

A gathering consensus suggests that technology might be creating alienation from our places of habitation. Richard Louv argues that we have become increasingly estranged from the natural world not because of urbanization but because of the digital culture that surrounds us (38). The implications are dire for health and wellness – physical, mental, and spiritual. David Orr, lamenting the lack of serious locality studies in higher education today, created a neologism, *biophobia* – "the culturally acquired urge to affiliate with technology, human artifacts, and solely with human interests regarding the natural world" (131). More and more studies of literature and culture are acknowledging the worrisome impacts of virtual realities (or virtualities) on people and the environment.

If biophobia is antithetical to the purposes of environmental education, biophilia is essential—not that students can be taught to love life, only given the opportunity, shown the ropes and rewards, ideally through the study of place. Although environmental education is a relatively new field, most practitioners seem to agree in lamentation with Orr: "If by some fairly young age . . . nature has not been experienced as a friendly place of adventure and excitement, biophilia will not take hold as it might have. An opportunity will have passed, and thereafter the mind will lack some critical dimension of perception and imagination" (143). "Perception and imagination," perhaps the most pertinent words in the passage above, lead back to the practice of using place as the basis for prompting critical thought. Adult learners can bring their perceptions and imaginations to bear on the place-based stuff of history, religion, public policy, psychology, and personal memory in ways that younger students cannot. If youthful opportunities pass too quickly to establish strong bioregional affiliations, then nonetheless the greater range of older students' experiences can serve as a forceful surrogate for the lost opportunities of youth.

The more sophisticated passions and ambitions of adult learners have their own rewards and may in fact lend themselves more fully to learning from a sense of place. The desire to affiliate, whatever its impetus, intellectual or emotional, is a powerful force. Mitchell Thomashow, in his provocative study of environmental education, argues that developing a profound sense of oneself in relation to natural and social ecosystems is a necessary foundation for the labor of environmental advocacy. Making use of political and spiritual models of self-development, Thomashow calls his project "ecological identity work" (5). He demonstrates that "ecological identity describes how we extend our sense of self in relation to nature, and that the degree of and objects of identification must be resolved individually" (3). An analysis of oneself as a product of place becomes a challenge to be met by studying the particulars of one's ecological origins. Just as "family of origin" studies have proven fruitful in counseling psychology in recent decades, Thomashow's ecological identity theory shows promise both for maturing in adult learners those affiliations that have been shortchanged in youth and for helping to vanquish youthful disaffiliations. The tantalizing possibility exists for environmental education and ecocriticism that ecological identity work can undertake the reciprocal tasks of reintegrating alienated citizens and restoring degraded ecosystems.

Underlying Thomashow's compelling study is the belief that "It is the personal introspection that drives one's commitment to environmentalism" (5). Far from the Protestant model of self-examination, as practiced by the American Puritans especially, ecological identity work does not seek to dwell on sins and commitments, lapses and leaps of faith, but rather on the social and biophysical particularities of one's place of origin. Poet William Wordsworth, himself a powerful

advocate for nature in the Lake District of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, recommended drawing upon "emotions recollected in tranquility" to recapture the emotional fluxes of childhood. Wordsworth's poetry is vividly place-based. Recollecting emotions in tranquility today is rarely part of the curriculum, though. The pace of media entertainment, the blitz of television imagery to which we are all exposed in public spaces, and the incessant commercial urgings to participate in the latest trends and fads – all tacitly discourage it.

Thomashow finds that adult learners, asked to recount environmental experiences, are most interested in exploring "childhood memories of special places, perceptions of disturbed places, and contemplations of wild places" (7). This narrow range of interests, all locked into perceptions of place, implies a dialectic or process to be worked through before synthesis can be attained. If memories of special places and wild places are devoutly to be wished for and affiliated with in our curricula, then disturbed places naturally will be regretted. The eye rejects what repels the heart and mind. The necessary introspection of ecological identity work, like the solitude nature writers often cultivate, does not need to be constructed as alienation and fragmentation but instead as affinity and affiliation. The upshot in our students might be an imaginative projection toward a more restorative time, or, better yet, a new or renewed commitment to one's sense of place.

Burrowing in the Backyard

Here is the process one of my students followed, in a composition class I taught several years ago, to explore and establish her own sense of place and ecological identity. She did not know it at the time, but she learned in the process to practice a bioregional ethic. Peter Berg, who originated the concept of bioregionalism, defines it this way:

> The concept of a bioregion as the basic location where people live, and the practice of reinhabitation of that life-place by its residents, are necessary to rejoin human beings into the overall web of life. Harmonizing with the natural systems of each bioregion is a necessary step toward preserving the whole biosphere.

My own devotion to my bioregion affected Karen and made her work more meaningful.

Just south of my university is a bioregion, the Palouse, where sophomore Karen Booth had lived her entire life. This area of fertile soil bridges two watersheds, one west to the Columbia Plateau, the other dropping south to the confluence of the Snake and Clearwater Rivers, both draining ultimately to the Columbia River and west to the Pacific Ocean. A breed of horse, the Appaloosa, was named for its genesis on the Palouse, a fact Karen learned only after starting to

study this place she had always considered her own.

One autumn afternoon, Karen saw the autumn sun grow dark by 2:00. Before her saintly neighbor could consult the Book of Revelation, drops of mud began to rain upon his Chevrolet. How in the world did mud come to fall from the sky? Only much later did Karen learn that the mud was made when rain passed through clouds of airborne dirt and bore it earthward. She witnessed that marvel firsthand and recalled it in a journal entry written for the class: "The sky was purple. Mr. Smith stood in his yard and gazed at his new car. By the time he turned around, his white dress shirt was splotched raw brown."

That is how her research began in a place she thought she knew. Some 20,000 years ago when the glacial ice dam forming Lake Missoula broke and broke again, lake water rushed through to the north and west of the Palouse, scouring the topsoil and weaving a region of coulees and channeled scablands – a land rich in rivers for spawning salmon, until hydropower projects like the Ice Harbor Dam ground fish the runs to a halt. The Palouse soil is mostly loess, she discovered. In geographers' jargon loess is "a buff to yellowish brown loamy deposition of North America and Asia," easily airborne, that appears to have been blown in after settling from the rushing waters in adjacent bioregions and collecting in a second prehistoric lake that eventually went dry.

Karen also discovered the names for vegetation indigenous to the Palouse: camas and bunchgrass, lupine and paintbrush, Rocky Mountain penstemon and ponderosa pine. Such species created biological diversity, which she defined as "variety in habitat and life forms." This biodiversity encouraged animal species now generally shoved out: grizzly bear and wolverines, bull trout and chinook salmon, sharptail and sage grouse. Native gamagrasses often have been supplanted by exotics like cheatgrass, starthistle, and knapweed. Commercial crops—wheat and peas and lentils— now blanket the steep hills.

To learn what forces impacted the indigenous species, Karen chose to study the short history of farming. The Palouse hills possessed an astounding 100 to 200 feet of loess topsoil when her ancestors, hungry for land to plow and plant, migrated in the early 19th century with the likes of the Reverend Marcus Whitman. Sodbuster, spurred by Manifest Destiny, came to be despised by mountain men. The Indians despised them, too, and finally they murdered Whitman and his wife in 1847. Karen learned how many acres the Palouse farmers have cleared and how many lie fallow today, subsidized by funds from the Conservation Reserve Program, "a U.S. government contract offered to farmers who own an abundance of farm acreage." Karen had come from a farming lineage, and her own ancestors would have ranked among those whom the mountain men despised.

In a sonorous entry for her journal, she wrote, "The head-high grasslands must have been more lively than these fields fuzzed green with wheat." Tender-eyed pioneers "compared the sight of grasslands to the sea, to the sky," and to "blowing animal fur" in the beginning. Prairie chickens, grouse, fowls of all species bred and nested on the sod, and "plow" was a sound that seed heads made when air went gushing past. Imagination, a wobbly first step toward the development of critical thinking, did not threaten to overtake Karen's scholarship in her journal entries. It promised appropriately to modulate the scholarship. If all work and no play make Jack a dull boy, students of every age benefit from language play and from the imaginative exercises that may trigger critical thinking.

At that stage in our online exchanges, I introduced Karen to a term I learned in my research: *monoculture*. This term characterizes the way Euro- Americans raise grain crops, graze dairy and beef cows, and plant nonnative trees in place of the native trees they cut. Farming systems often work by eliminating "weedy" or "predatory" species and reducing native diversity to single crops. This is a sound system economically, but it can produce biological ruin. What is forfeited with the loss of biodiversity, Karen learned, is some tangible integrity of place. "To know the spirit of a place is to realize that you are a part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is whole," the poet Gary Snyder has written (38), and the wholeness of her home place began to seem fragmented. "But what has really been lost?" she asked in her journal as the exchange grew more intense, as the voices of historians and Christian pioneers, combat biologists and farmers and poets came together to weave an interdisciplinary web.

What really has been lost? That question leads to ethics, which is probably the trickiest intellectual region of all. If the loss is not a material loss, is it really a loss at all? Just like that old conundrum about a tree in a forest, if no one misses the things that are gone, does their absence matter? More to her point as an aspiring literary activist, if no one expresses the loss of things peculiar to a certain bioregion, is that loss really a loss at all? And here she began the search to find her place, not a search from room to room but the search within herself to find out how she felt. Is she any the poorer for never having gotten to live with extirpated species, the sage grouse, sharptail grouse, salmon and trout?

Further reading about farming revealed that only within the lifetime of her father did the use of chemical "inputs" begin—fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, and fumigants. How many sprayings per year? How many tons of toxins per spraying? What "target species" of weeds and bugs need be controlled? What "non-target" species get a dose as well? Karen had read excerpts of *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson's study of the impacts of DDT in the 1950s and '60s, as well as Edward Abbey's lament for bats in Carlsbad Caverns diminished by toxic sprays

used to regulate crop pests in West Texas.

Back to that autumn day when winds blew hard and the sky grew dark, what caused that all to happen? In 1980, when Karen was 10, Mount St. Helens had blown its dome and hurled tons of ash across her bioregion, but no volcanoes were erupting when the sky grew dark and raindrops turned to mud. *The Grapes of Wrath* furnished a context. "Tractored out" of Oklahoma, exiled to California, the Joad family of migrant laborers in the novel by John Steinbeck became victims of ruthless banking, careless agriculture, and drought: a perfect storm of conditions, both natural and human-made. The Oklahoma Dust Bowl started in part from ignorant farming practices. Another term, "sustainability," entered the range of debates that would later comprise her research paper sequence for the course. Depression-era farmers did not farm their land sustainably. Without knowing about contour plowing or rest- and-rotation methods, they tilled and planted the Midwest plains in ways that could not be sustained. They exhausted the land. A place they had started farming, a place that was whole, was losing a part of its wholeness every day the wind blew. And as a result the human culture, too, could no longer be whole in that place.

Could it have been topsoil that the Palouse wind lifted above the region? Karen interviewed agronomy professor John Reaganold of Washington State University and learned that an acre of Palouse cropland loses five to 20 tons of topsoil every year. How does a ton of dirt equate to fractions of an acre-inch? How far can topsoil sail on a good stiff wind? Which streams does it flow into, and how far away? How much topsoil is left today? Questions generated questions. "Do you see those fawn-colored spots on the hilltops?" Reaganold had asked. Those are known as "clay knobs," places where the topsoil has been washed away by rainfall or snow melt, blown away by winds, all 100 to 200 feet of topsoil the pioneers discovered and subdued, as the Book of Genesis enjoined them to do. Who says you can't see wind? Karen had seen the wind and it was brown.

For her second required interview in the research project sequence, Karen met with Nancy Taylor of the Palouse-Clearwater Environmental Institute. For part of every busy year, Nancy helped to farm her family land in northern Utah. The rest of the time she wrote grants, performed community outreach, and attended meetings of the National Organic Standards Board. Nancy argued – and to Karen her passion was plain – that our farming practices cause the soil to blow and flow to parts unknown. A mere 60 years ago, no one spread chemicals; farmers rotated crops, fertilized by animal or green manures, let the soil rest or lie fallow, and erosion was never a problem. In the decades since WWII, though, most farmers have become "chemically dependent," a clever original phrase of Karen's that resonates. Since the war, a powerful techno-industrial economic system has emerged, one with vast implications both for

the food we eat and the air we breathe.

While organic farming may not produce such high yields as chemically dependent farming, Nancy demonstrated that it promotes biodiversity, exempts the land from sprays, and keeps chemicals from our foods and water tables. Moreover, it slows erosion. Roots and leaves and decaying organic materials, brisk with microbes building compost, enhance soil stability. Soil heavy with organic nutrients would not have been lost to a whim of the wind like the one that Karen witnessed on that stormy autumn afternoon. "You don't have to be a 'granola' to agree that organic agriculture offers ways to control the problem of soil erosion on the Palouse," Karen concluded her major researched argument for my writing class. In doing so, she appealed skillfully to a set of assumptions that are apt to be shared by her audience. At the same time, she riffed on "granola," a pejorative moniker still not admitted to our standard dictionaries.

The cloud that she had seen that day, the wind that had obscured the sun, was soil erosion. It began with the tilling of too-high hills, it grew worse with loss of health the soil suffered when chemicals were sprayed for decades, and it got caught up in the high brisk winds for which the region is well known. The two research papers that Karen composed that quarter were compelling successes—drawing as they did from interdisciplinary sources, driven as they were by curiosity and a native passion that began in her attachment to her place.

Humanizing the Cosmos

When intellectuals embraced humanism, many of them banished nature as a site of inspiration and wonder, a route to the truth. By and large it is not considered rational, and hence it is not humanistic, to regard contemplation of the natural world as a route to human improvement. Seventeenth-century Puritan poet and rhetorician John Milton, a canonical writer and pillar of Christian humanism, reveals an inherited attitude toward nature and its incompatibility with the human divine. In Milton's paradigm, nature (Satan in the snake's shape) occasioned Adam and Eve's tragic fall from grace. In his poetic hymn "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," news of the newborn God-in-man drives pagan deities from the sacred groves, at the same time driving nature outside the reach of human reverence. Those suspect nature deities in Milton's devotional poem grow superfluous, shamefaced, tawdry, and frail beside humankind's resplendent savior-to-be, Jesus Christ. "Nature in awe to him / Had doffed her gaudy trim," which is to say that abject nature immediately deferred to Christ's greater qualifications and glory (ll. 32-33).

Significantly enough, nature throughout the poem is female, while Christ is male. She seeks "To hide her guilty front with innocent snow" (l. 38); she mantles herself in December whiteness,

that is, to feign innocence and purity. Similarly Shakespeare's King Lear, imagining a "simpering dame" in his mad interlude on the heath, raves about the "riotous appetite" she disguises – especially in that risky space below the waist, whose domain "is all the fiends'; there's hell, there's darkness, / There's the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, / Stench, consumption" (4.6.114, 123-25). In the humanist equation, nature is female. As such she is dissembling, sexually charged, deadly and dire. Vestiges of such attitudes remain today. Depraved men and savage beings hide in nature, women are sullied, and children drown or
suffer attacks by beasts. Humans must be vigilant, wary of the wild, and zealous enough to effect a keen regeneration through violence when required. Humans reading such accounts may risk those same assumptions. Still today, reevaluating nature and culture may make a perilous journey for college students.

Milton's humanistic poem depicts nature, illuminated in the light of Christ, as the grotesque source of humanity's unfortunate fall from grace. *Genius loci* are involved in that fall. The origin of our species' sorrow, nature, is "Pollute[d] with sinful blame" and blasted with "foul deformities" (ll. 41, 44) for its complicity with humankind's lapse from grace. Correspondingly the sun, understood today as the daily progenitor of life on Earth, "hid his head for shame / As his inferior flame / The new-enlightened world no more should need..." (ll. 80-82). Here, Milton exercises great poetic license in depicting a sun overshadowed by the infant man-god. Here, Milton exemplifies the quintessence of humanism; our species does not need the sun, his reasoning proceeds, so great is humankind and the human god. Such theocentric fancy belies our ecocentric knowledge that death begets life. Spiritual life emanates from heaven, while "the old dragon under ground," i.e., Satan, outgrowth of the planet's bowels, "wroth to see his kingdom fail, / Swings the scaly horror of his folded tail" (ll. 168, 171-72). That is to say, Satan and nature and the sun together conspire to create a kind of counter-kingdom to Heaven.

Planetary powers appear evil in Milton's worldview, and thus it falls on humans to overthrow that evil – through rationality, technology, and faith. The most telling instance of humanism's supremacy over nature occurs in Milton's poem with the revealing expulsion of animated nature when the Christ-child arrives. Then, from "haunted spring and dale," the "parting Genius is with sighing sent . . ." (ll. 183, 185). A protector or guardian deity in classical antiquity, the "Genius" typically pertained to a particular place, as in the Latin *genius loci*, distinctive characters or atmospheres of a place with respect to the impression they make on the mind. Peculiarly enough, as if aware that Milton's intolerance of paganism flaws his art, the editors of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* from 1993 furnished a quaint disclaimer. "With the coming of Christ all these picturesque local deities are dismissed, and the poet clearly regrets their departure" (Abrams et al. 1440, n.9). "Regrets"? The editors furnished no evidence of the poet's regret, nor is that regret evident. Moreover, the editorial "picturesque" is irretrievably

condescending. In a second apparent attempt to rescue Milton from biophobia and unregenerate humanism, the editors commented in a footnote, "Like ghosts at sunrise, the pagan gods, geniuses, and fays (fairies) are all bound to disappear at the rising of the Christian sun" (1442, n. 6). Neither Milton nor his editors deserve more blame than other writers of modern times, but they do furnish textbook examples of humanism's sway over indigenous place historically, as well as our attendant alienation from nature today. The more recent Norton editions omit those footnotes.

Without directly attributing such alienation to humanism, many other nature writers and environmentalists have lamented what we lost when we tossed our erstwhile reverence for natural places. If college teachers were to integrate environmental literature into their classrooms, a sense of place Could be enhanced. Annie Dillard, the 1974 Pulitzer Prize-winner for nonfiction, deplores our species' resolute silencing of nature. Writing as a Christian herself, she indicts the Judeo-Christian tradition for teaching us a lesson we have taken too hard to heart. That lesson is "the muteness of the human stance in relation to all that is not human" (92). For most witnesses except a select few granolas and scientists (odd bedfellows if ever there were), such muteness in the face of nature seems routine. In her gentle jeremiad Dillard sadly notes, "It is difficult to undo our own damage, and to recall to our presence that which we have asked to leave. It is hard to desecrate a grove and change your mind" (88). The damage, culturally speaking, has been done. Still, aiming college courses toward the job of restoring those desecrated groves is something we may undertake; it is a challenge worthy of the stakes. Observe closely, Dillard recommends. Attend as if attention were an epistemology, for until the show we drove from town returns, "until the pagan gods slip back to their hilltop groves, all we can do with the whole inhuman array is watch it" (90). Watching so closely would involve a mystical process that is alien to theoretical humanists: it requires "sacrifice, the suppression of self-consciousness, and a certain precise tilt of the will, so that the will becomes transparent and hollow, a channel for the work" (88). Most of us find it hard to imagine college curricula straying very far from their comfort zones unless they were to embrace the emerging eco-consciousness, unless they effect a merger with environmental education. Corroborating Dillard, Deborah Tall contends, "Judaism is the religion that by and large defused the religion of sacred place" (106). Tall tackles this tender subject with the insight of one raised in the Jewish faith. "The pagan gods the early Jews set out to overthrow were the numerous place-defined, local nature deities," she writes, as we see so abundantly in Milton and in other writers who shaped Judeo-Christian humanism.

Naturalizing the Human

To foster sensitivity to place both inside and outside the classroom means to begin to unyoke

from our dependence on theoretical humanism to shape our identities. Students might gain an empirical grasp of the fact that we remain animals first – mammals who share 95% of our genetic material with chimpanzees – and human beings only second.

As mentioned earlier, a sophisticated environmental education necessitates an ecological criticism, an ecocriticism. If some scholars are wary of trends from Europe, after some of the excesses of poststructuralism, ecocriticism nimbly has avoided those pitfalls so far. Contributors to *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, a scholarly journal published since 1993, and the more recent *Journal of Ecocriticism*, are demonstrating the viability of this move. In the following sample of original ecocriticism, I draw attention, however briefly, to an obscure sonnet by Gerard Manley Hopkins. He is a favorite poet of green readers for the past 100 years, even though his work celebrates nature in a way that redounds ultimately to the glory of God. Hopkins worked as a Catholic priest. Unconventionally, though, "The Sea and the Skylark," written in 1882, never makes mention of God and ends on a particularly evolutionary note that reconciles Hopkins' brave strain of Christianity with the challenges of Darwinian evolution. Few critics have been willing to acknowledge the Darwinian strains in the poetry of Hopkins, but an ecocritical approach to this poem may allow contemporary readers to hear it anew.

The Sea and the Skylark

On ear and ear two noises to old to end
Trench – right, the tide that ramps against the shore;
With a flood or a fall, low lull-off or all roar,
Frequenting there while moon shall wear and wend.

Left hand, off land, I hear the lark ascend,
His rash-fresh re-winded new-skeinèd score
In crisps of curl off wild winch whirl, and pour
And pelt music, till none's to spill nor spend.

How these two shame this shallow and frail town!
How ring right out our sordid turbid time,
Being pure! We, life's pride and cared-for crown,

Have lost that cheer and charm of earth's past prime:
Our make and making break, are breaking, down
To man's last dust, drain fast towards man's first slime.

Hopkins contrasts an unnamed town with a skylark and the sea. The town, located some distance away from the speaker, is positioned as a human construct and as a synecdoche for human civilization. The bird and sea, on opposite hands of the poem's speaker, are synecdoches for nature – that is, they stand for the whole of nature in its various guises. As they are represented in the poem, the town is static; the bird and sea, dynamic and aesthetic. The tideline demarcates nature from civilization, separating the earthbound town from the elements of air and water, which are the respective media of the bird and the sea, a contrast implying a perceptual conflict in the speaker of the poem. Significantly, the poet references the moon as the force that drives the ocean tides.

The "music" of birdsong inspires the poet to simulate that music with his own medium, the medium of language, at the same time that it tests the limits of his facility with that language. Bird music is daring and innovative ("rash-fresh"); it is constantly renewing ("re-winded"); it is smooth and seamless as silk cloth ("new-skeinèd"). The bird-music is a portion of a "score"; the bird writes on the sky in sound and in motion alike; the bird's song accompanies the bird's rising and falling flight. Performer and conductor at once, the bird enacts an aesthetic sleight-of-hand by stripping its cloth- music from a reel or wheel, i.e., a "wild winch," a bobbin or a spool. Human tools and products of human tools, outgrowths of the town and civilization such as the winch, furnish ready reference points. Hopkins' keen attention to the Welsh "cynghanedd or consonant-chime" (265) might seem indulgent or excessive to modern ears. However, Hopkins considered the linguistic exuberance or delirium of the bard to be a close approximation of the bird.

Placing nature and civilization in conflict, as Hopkins does in this poem, suggests a criticism of the humanist project. I did some digging in etymologies and in other Hopkins poems, most famously his "God's Grandeur." Civilization, represented by the town in "The Sea and the Skylark," is shameful, shallow, frail, soiled, weary, smelly, materialistic, and even sick. In short, only in a bitterly ironic sense is humankind the "crown" of creation. Not known for irony, Hopkins may be read in a new light hereby. Indeed, humankind is not evolving but devolving – as shown by the noun "lost," the adjective "sordid," and the verb "drain fast"). If the word "crown" denotes the pinnacle or the apex of achievement and glory, it also calls up the image of the crown of thorns Christ wore in passion when he shouldered the sins of humankind. We – humans and our civilization – "crown" nature only in an ironic sense with our own ignominy. Nature in the poem, as embodied by the bird and by the ocean, contrasts with civilization, shines by contrast with it, inasmuch as nature is charming, spontaneous, cheerful, powerful, fresh, unrestrained, musical, artless, and pure. The bird and the sea are sentient beings, *genius loci*, vibrant and alive. By contrast, the town and the human efforts it represents (by means of a clever synecdoche) are dead. They are moribund in ways that Christian conceptions of a fall

from grace in the Garden of Eden fail adequately to explain.

Dense and compelling, "The Sea and the Skylark" swells richly with conflicting sorrows and joys. It does not rely on Christian readings of its imagery. Its intellectual author could synthesize his Christianity and the challenges of Darwinian evolution. Nowhere in the Hopkins poem is human fallibility ("this shallow and frail town") attributed to Adam or Eve – those weak beings who yielded to the rebel angel Satan – quite the opposite. The poem's progressive surprise lies in the final noun phrase, "first slime," an inescapable allusion to the then-recent scientific theory of Darwin, whereby the miraculous cycle of life that gave rise to humankind began as sea-slime. Notice how *slime* cooperates with *trench* in the poem's opening and *drain* at its end; lower life forms puddle and ooze back to the primordial soup. Our species and civilization, unworthy and lacking imagination, devolve back to the slime that gave rise to us. That same slime is draining to the sea where it (and we) may start over again at the place where we began.

To acknowledge this 130-year-old poem as environmental literature requires the reader to look at it differently. Looking at it differently calls into play some innovative critical approaches, some ecocritical skills. Interrogating the legacy of humanism offers a lens to focus for those skills. Literature of the environment is coming to be redefined in innovative terms, both for the devices by which it reproves business and industry and for the ways it historically has venerated the rights of nature. Scholars of Hopkins slowly are coming to recognize the ways the Catholic priest had begun to reconcile the evolutionary scientist. See, e.g., the article by Cary H. Plotkin in the Gerard Manley Hopkins Archive.

The Heart of the Problem

When R. F. Kennedy, Jr. addressed an auditorium full of people where I work at Eastern Washington University, he ended his fine speech entitled "Our Environmental Destiny" with a set of humanist appeals. Because so many of our arts and principles of American government are based on nature, Kennedy argued, we should save natural spaces as an archive or living repository of our culture. Not for their own sake, not because nature is alive and life has been accorded legal rights, but simply because saving nature saves our particular values and heritage, we ought to make the environment a central organizing principle of civilization. Kennedy was certainly right, but for the wrong reasons, or at least his rhetoric was ill chosen. He was appealing to his audience in humanistic ways, waxing anthropocentric, even "speciesist," as environmentalists have begun to say, a distinction that really lies at the heart of the problem this essay explores. If we humans continue to hold ourselves apart from and above other sectors of the natural world, we will continue in the rut of historical humanism. If we scorn the prospects for an interspecies communication, we will be tacitly silencing the more-

than-human world.

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